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[Photograph](#) taken from *USS Maddox* (DD-731) during her engagement with three North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, 2 August 1964.

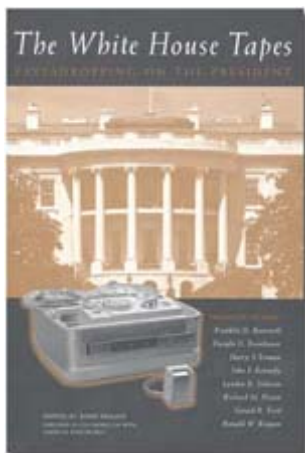


[Oil on canvas](#) by Commander E.J. Fitzgerald, January 1965. It depicts the engagement between *USS Maddox* (DD-731) and three North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats on 2 August 1964.

## LBJ Tapes on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident

Source: John Prados, *The White House Tapes*  
(New York: The New Press, 2003)

Note: These clips are in Windows Media Audio format (.wma)



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### AUGUST 3, 1964: PRESIDENT JOHNSON DISCUSSES AN INCIDENT IN THE GULF OF TONKIN WITH DEFENSE SECRETARY ROBERT S. McNAMARA (IN TWO CONVERSATIONS)

On August 2, 1964, the American destroyer *Maddox*, on patrol off the coast of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was attacked by several North Vietnamese torpedo boats. The attack happened hours after South Vietnamese raiders struck at two targets on the North Vietnamese coast as part of a U.S. program of graduated covert pressure against the North that was known as Operations Plan (OPLAN)-34A. This marked the beginning of a series of events that has come to be called the Tonkin Gulf incident.

The *Maddox* was actually on an intelligence mission

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off the northern coast, carrying with a van of extra communications and electronics gear along with a complement of specialists from the Naval Security Group, a naval complement to the National Security Agency. Their task was to intercept North Vietnamese communications. The ship was in international waters when attacked, but had been inside territorial waters claimed by North Vietnam when Hanoi's torpedo boats were sent to sea. Vietnamese authorities have disclosed that the response was ordered by local commanders without reference to Hanoi. The *Maddox* did not expect any attack-the mission commander had been briefed in Taiwan previously that there would be none - but she was also completely unaware of the provocation to North Vietnam that had occurred simultaneously in the form of the OPLAN-34A strikes. There was no real surprise, however. The North Vietnamese torpedo boats' communications were intercepted, as well as the orders sending them out, and the craft were detected as they approached the U.S. warship. In the ensuing battle two of the three boats were sunk and the third badly damaged, with no losses to the *Maddox*. The action in the Tonkin Gulf took place in the afternoon local time, which was before dawn in Washington, and by early morning in the capital there was a scramble to decide what to do about the situation.

This telephone call represents the first conversation between President Johnson and defense secretary Robert McNamara on the incident. Johnson had already had some conversations with political advisers, and it is noteworthy that his talk with McNamara centers on handling political aspects of the incident. It is also notable that McNamara in this conversation clearly favors explaining to Congress the link between the incident and the OPLAN-34A activities. McNamara would take the position in later public hearings that he was unaware of any such link and as a result would be the target of intense criticism. LBJ himself was well aware of the connection and had explained it to an adviser in a different conversation less than an hour earlier. The president here tells McNamara to limit discussion to key congressional figures, including Speaker of the House John McCormick, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, and Minority Leader Everett Dirksen. From this telephone call it appears that McNamara's later public comments were made under instruction from Lyndon Johnson.

### [Clip 1: Lyndon B. Johnson Monday, August 3, 1964, 10:30 A.M. \(3:34\) Telephone Conversation with Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense](#)

McNamara, Secretary of Defense,

Regarding the Gulf of Tonkin Incident(s)  
Involving the Destroyer U.S.S. Maddox

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Now I wonder if you don't think it'd be wise for you and Rusk to get Mac, uh, the Speaker and Mansfield to call a group of fifteen to twenty people together eh from the Armed Services and Foreign Relations to tell them what happened. A good many of them are saying to me

Secretary Robert McNamara: Right. I've been thinking about this myself, and I thought that uh

President Johnson: They're going to start an investigation

Secretary McNamara: Yeah.

President Johnson: if you don't.

Secretary McNamara: Yeah.

President Johnson: And you got Dirksen up there

Secretary McNamara: Yeah

President Johnson: and he's saying you've got to study it further, and say to Mansfield, "Now the President wants us, you, to get the proper people." And we come in and you say, "They fired at us. We responded immediately. And we took out one of their boats and put the other two running. And we kept our..., we're puttin' our boats right there, and we're not running on in."

Secretary McNamara: And it's hard to destroy.

President Johnson: That's right

Secretary McNamara: Right. And we're going to, and I think I should also, or we should also at that time, Mr. President, explain this Op Plan 34-A, these covert operations. There's no question but what that had bearing on. And on Friday night, as you probably know, we had four TP [McNamara means PT] boats from Vietnam manned by Vietnamese or other nationals, attack two islands. And we expended, oh, a thousand rounds of ammunition of one kind or another against them. We probably shot up a radar station and a few other miscellaneous buildings. And following twenty-four hours after that, with this destroyer in that same area, undoubtedly led them to connect the two events.

President Johnson: Well say that to Dirksen.

Secretary McNamara: That's what I know he'll like.

President Johnson: You notice Dirksen says this morning, that "we got to reassess the situation, do something about it." I'd tell him that we're doing what he's talking about.

Secretary McNamara: Well, I, I was, I was thinking doing this myself in personal visits. But I think your thought is better. We'll get the group together. You want us to do it at the White House or would you rather do it at State or Defense?

President Johnson: I believe it'd be better to do it uh up

on the Hill.

Secretary McNamara: All right.

President Johnson: I believe it'd be better if you say to Mansfield, "You call"

Secretary McNamara: Yup

President Johnson: Foreign Relations

Secretary McNamara: Yup, OK.

President Johnson: Armed Services

Secretary McNamara: OK. OK.

President Johnson: and and get Speaker to do it over on his side [i.e., within the House of Representatives, as opposed to the Senate].

Secretary McNamara: We'll do it

President Johnson: And just say it's very, I'd tell him awfully quiet, though, so they won't go in and be making a bunch of speeches. And tell Rusk that a, that's my idea.

Secretary McNamara: Great. .

President Johnson: And he's in New York, so I don't know whether's he's got back.

Secretary McNamara: Well I just talked to George Ball a few minutes ago, and I'll have George arrange it. Or at least I'll tell him that, and then I'll call the Speaker and Mansfield himself.

President Johnson: Now I wish that uh you'd give me some guidance on what we ought to say. I want to leave an impression on the background in the people we talk to over here that we're gonna be firm as hell without saying something that's dangerous. Now what do you think? Uh, uh, the people that are calling me up, I just talked to a New York banker, I just talked to a fellow in Texas, they all feel that the Navy responded wonderfully and that's good. But they want to be damned sure I don't pull 'em out and run, and they want to be damned sure that we're firm. That's what all the country wants because Goldwater's raising so much hell about how he's gonna blow 'em off the moon, and they say that we oughten to do anything that the national interest doesn't require. But we sure oughta always leave the impression that if you shoot at us, you're going to get hit.

Secretary McNamara: Well I think you would want to instruct George Reedy this morning at his news conference to say that you you personally have ordered the, the Navy to carry on the routine patrols uh off the coast of North Vietnam, uh to add an additional destroyer to the one that has been carrying on the patrols, to provide an air cap, and to issue instructions to the commanders to destroy any uh force that attacks our force in international waters.

President Johnson: [speaks over McNamara] Bob, if you don't mind,

Secretary McNamara: . . . I think that's the way...

President Johnson: If you don't mind, call Walter

Jenkins and tell him

Secretary McNamara: Sure

President Johnson: that you want to dictate this to me

Secretary McNamara: I'll do it right now

President Johnson: to give to my people or George Reedy because I'm over at the Mansion with some folks here

Secretary McNamara: I'll do it right now.

President Johnson: OK. Right.

**Clip 2: Lyndon B. Johnson**

**Monday, August 3, 1964, 1:21 P.M. (1:42)**

**Telephone Conversation with Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, Regarding the Gulf of Tonkin Incident**

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Yes?

Secretary Robert McNamara: Mr. President, I set up those meetings for this afternoon with the Senate and House leaders and I thought if it was agreeable with you, I would say to them that some months ago you asked us to be prepared for any eventuality in the Southeast Asia area and as a result of that we have prepared and just completed in great detail target analyses of the targets of North Vietnam. As a matter of fact in ten minutes I'm going over with the Chiefs [the Joint Chiefs of Staff] the final work on this. We have pictures, analyses, numbers of sorties, bomb loadings, everything prepared for all the target systems of North Vietnam, and I would describe this to the the leaders, simply indicating your desire that we be fully prepared for whatever may develop. And furthermore we've prepared detailed movement studies of any contingency forces required, air squadrons, et cetera.

President Johnson: So obviously now, if you go put this in the paper...

Secretary McNamara: Yeah, and I, I'm going to tell 'em that

President Johnson: and your enemy reads about it then he thinks we're already taking off and obviously you've got us in a war. But I've got to be candid with you and I want to tell you the truth.

Secretary McNamara: Exactly. I was going to start my remarks by that, but be damn sure it doesn't, or try to be sure it doesn't get in the paper.

President Johnson: And uh, uh I think it's right, and I, I will tell 'em that yesterday morning that uh, uh they reported the *Maddox* incident and uh during the day yesterday we sent we sent out this order and read them the statement I made this morning.

Secretary McNamara: Right, I'll do that.

President Johnson: And, so that Dirksen doesn't think that we have to wait on him, and that we...

Secretary McNamara: Yeah.

President Johnson: did go out when.

Secretary McNamara: Yes, I'll tell them the order went out yesterday and you were simply repeating it to the press this morning.

President Johnson: OK.

**AUGUST 1964: THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT CONTINUES- PRESIDENT JOHNSON DISCUSSES BOMBING NORTH VIETNAM WITH ROBERT S. McNAMARA (IN FOUR CONVERSATIONS)**

Following the original incident of August 2, the Johnson administration wanted to underline its belief that U.S. Navy warships had the freedom to pass anywhere in international waters, naturally including most of the Gulf of Tonkin. Consequently President Johnson approved a move under which the destroyer *Maddox* was reinforced by the *C. Turner Joy*, and both ships entered the Gulf together. With the American warships in a state of hyperalert, on the night of August 3/4 the warships recorded a series of sound (sonar) and electronic (radar) readings interpreted to be attacking torpedo boats. Amid the confusion of that night, radio signals pertaining to the August 2 incident were read as Hanoi ordering a fresh attack, and expectant sailors on watch saw things they decided were enemy boats. Washington was initially told the warships were under attack. Although the commander on the scene, Captain John D. Herrick, quickly amplified the initial, excited reports with one stating he doubted the reality of the attacks, Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp nevertheless proceeded as if the attacks were genuine.

Because of the time difference between Washington and the Tonkin Gulf, and the time needed to transmit and receive messages from the remote naval forces involved, this sequence of President Johnson telephone calls on August begins at a moment when Washington was as yet unaware of the claimed second attack. McNamara's statement in the 9:43 AM. conversation that "this ship is allegedly to be attacked tonight" is highly significant-it means that Washington was already operating on the basis of the radio intercepts mistakenly attributed to August 4th. Equally important, LBJ and McNamara discuss retaliatory action against North Vietnam in spite of the fact that no attack has yet occurred. Also of interest is President Johnson's statement that the United States "should pull one of these things that you've . . . been doing. . . on one of their bridges or something." This is a clear reference to the OPLAN-34A raids, confusion about which had been a factor in the initial Tonkin Gulf engagement on August 2. Here LBJ suggests a

measure that would actually increase Hanoi's incentives to fight.

A little over an hour later, at 10:53 AM., McNamara has a second conversation with the president in which Johnson's concern centers on the details of the supposed combat in the Gulf. McNamara tells LBJ that the U.S. aircraft carrier *Ticonderoga* sent out aircraft to help defend the two destroyers, and he mistakenly reports that the planes have seen two unidentified vessels and three planes near the American warships (Admiral John Stockdale, pilot of one of the *Ticonderoga* aircraft that night, affirms that the U.S. planes saw nothing at all). McNamara goes on to tell the president that he has developed a list of targets in North Vietnam that can be struck in retaliation. He promises to bring the list over to the White House.

Less than ten minutes later, McNamara comes back on the phone to tell President Johnson that Pacific theater commander Admiral Sharp has told him the destroyers are under torpedo attack. Here the secretary of defense reports information now known to be false, although McNamara did not know this at the time. LBJ responds by ordering the secretary of defense and other top officials to meet and coordinate a retaliatory bombing. There is no tape of that meeting, but a memorandum recording the meeting of the National Security Council that day notes McNamara entering the meeting and discussing the alleged attack. Secretary Dean Rusk comments that recommendations are being prepared but are not yet ready. Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon warns, "There is a limit on the number of times we can be attacked by the North Vietnamese without hilling their naval bases." For almost two hours following the NSC meeting, LBJ lunched with McNamara, Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, the CIA's John McCone, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus R. Vance. It was at lunch, according to a Pentagon chronology of these events, that LBJ agreed to a swift retaliatory air strike and a specific set of targets. During this lunch (at 1:27 P.M.), Washington received the message from Captain Herrick on the *Maddox* that cast doubt on the veracity of the attack. This report had no effect on the actions of Washington officials.

By late afternoon the comings and goings at the White House and the Pentagon had put the press on notice that something was going on, and leaks became inevitable. Shortly after 5:00 P.M., President Johnson talked to McNamara again. This time they shared the news that the Associated Press and United Press wire



services had both put out the story that another attack had taken place in the Tonkin Gulf. LBJ now approved an official Pentagon statement on the supposed attack (although as recently as twenty minutes earlier McNamara had been meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to "overcome [the] lack of a clear and convincing showing that an attack on the destroyers had in fact occurred" he Joint Chiefs of Staff approved a message ordering execution of the retaliatory bombing and it was sent out at 5:19. A follow-up NSC meeting took place an hour later. That meeting gave pro forma consideration to the alleged North Vietnamese attack and the retaliation, again not taking into account the doubts of the on-scene destroyer commander, Captain Herrick. The White House meeting also tabled a prospective resolution approving the use of force by Congress. LBJ raised the matter of a resolution at a briefing of senior legislators which began at 6:45. The administration supplied a text as discussed by the NSC and then between LBJ and the legislators, and that draft became the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which was subsequently used to justify the entire U.S. war in Vietnam.

There was a final conversation between LBJ and McNamara at 9:15 P.M., at which time the president was caught up in the drama of Mississippi. Then the questions were largely ones of coordinating the actual launch of the attack with LBJ's public statement. President Johnson finally made the statement at 11:36 P.M., approximately half an hour prior to the expected time of arrival of the U.S. strike aircraft over their targets in North Vietnam.

Thus the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam went forward based on the mistaken belief in a second attack in the Gulf of Tonkin. In a certain sense, because the resolution that passed Congress was used to justify the U.S. military commitment, the entire Vietnam War can be said to have been based on a misunderstanding. Just over a month afterward, when another pair of American warships in the Gulf of Tonkin also thought they had come under attack, LBJ began to express doubts about the reality of the August incident. In 1997, in Hanoi, Robert McNamara, in a conversation with Vietnamese Commander General Vo Nguyen Giap, also concluded that the August 4, 1964, incident had never occurred. That is now the general consensus among historians of the Vietnam War.

**Clip 3: Lyndon B. Johnson**  
**Tuesday, August 4, 1964, 9:43 A.M. (6:09)**  
**Telephone Conversation with Robert**  
**McMamara, Secretary of Defense,**  
**Regarding the Incident in the Gulf of Tonkin**



**with the Destroyers U.S.S.  
Maddox and U.S.S. C. Turner Joy**

Male Voice: Yes, sir. Off limits.

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Hello?

Female Voice: Secretary Robert McNamara's calling you again, sir. "O"

Secretary Robert McNamara: Mr. President, uh, General Wheeler and I are sitting here together. We just received a cable from Admiral Sharp [Ulysses S. Grant Sharp Jr. was the American commander for the Pacific] making three recommendations with respect to our destroyer tracks and enemy action responses. And I wanted to mention them to you with a recommendation. I discussed this with with Dean Rusk [secretary of state] and he and I are in agreement on the recommendations.

Sharp recommends first that the uh, the track of the destroyer be shifted from eleven miles offshore to eight miles offshore. This makes no sense to us; we would recommend against it. His purpose, by shifting the track, is simply to make clear that we believe the twelve-mile limit is not an effective limit on us. We don't, we think we do that adequately by sailing at eleven miles as opposed to eight.

Secondly, Sharp recommends that we authorize the task

President Johnson: What reason does he give for his eight?

Secretary McNamara: Simply that it more clearly indicates our, our refusal to accept a twelve-mile restriction. We think we've clearly indicated our refusal to accept a twelve-mile restriction with the, the eleven-mile limit; we see no need to change the track at this time.

President Johnson: Why, what, what other objections do you have?

Secretary McNamara: It, it, uh, changes a program that that uh shouldn't be changed frequently. These orders are very precise; the tracks are laid down very clearly; they go through the three command channels to get out there; this ship is allegedly uh to be attacked tonight- we don't like to see a change in operation plan of this kind at this time. And we don't think it achieves any any uh international purpose, so no, certainly no military purpose is served by it.

President Johnson: All right.

Secretary McNamara: Secondly, he recommends that the task force commander be authorized to pursue the attacking vessels in the event he is attacked and destroy their bases. In this case, it would be

President Johnson: Wait just a minute. [Speaking away from the telephone: I've got a call. I can't hear him. I've got a real important thing... ]. Go ahead, Mac.

Secretary McNamara: Secondly, he recommends that the task force commander be authorized to pursue any attacker and destroy the base of the attacker. In this instance, if he were attacked by patrol boats, it would mean that he would pursue the patrol craft into the shore line, uh identify the base of the patrol craft and destroy that base. Now this is an action that we might well wish to consider after the second attack. But I think it would be inappropriate, and General Wheeler agrees, and Dean Rusk agrees, inappropriate to provide the task force commander that authority. There will be ample time for us, after a second attack, to bring this problem to your attention, and you can then decide how far you wish to pursue the attacker into his base area.

President Johnson: What objections do you have to pursuing it?

Secretary McNamara: With only the objection that if we give such authority, you have, in a sense, lost control of, of the degree of our uh response to the North Vietnamese. If you don't op, exactly what bases will be attacked, where they are in relation to population centers, how much force will be applied to attack them, when it will occur. I, I personally would recommend to you, after a second attack on our ships, that we do retaliate against the coast of North Vietnam some way or other. And we'll be prepared

President Johnson: What I was thinking about when I was eating breakfast, but I couldn't talk it-I was thinking that it looks to me like the weakness of our position is that, uh, we respond only to an action and we don't have any of our own. But when they, when they move on us, and they shoot at us, I think we not only ought to shoot at them, but almost simultaneously, uh, uh, pull one of these things that you've, you've been doing

Secretary McNamara: Right.

President Johnson: on one of their bridges or something.

Secretary McNamara: Exactly. I, I quite agree with you, Mr. President. And I'm not, not sure that the response ought to be as Admiral Sharp suggests

President Johnson: Well me not, I'm not either, I'm not either. I don't know, unless I knew what base it was

Secretary McNamara: Yes.

President Johnson: and what is compelled, but I wish we could have something that we already picked out, and uh

Secretary McNamara: We'll see

President John and just hit about three of them damned quick. Right after

Secretary McNamara: We will have that, and, and I, I've talked to Mac Bundy [national security adviser] a moment ago and told him that I thought that was the

most important subject we should consider today, and, and be prepared to recommend to you a response, a retaliation move against North Vietnam in the event this attack takes place within the next six to nine hours. And we

President Johnson: All right. Now we better do that at lunch. There's some things I don't want to go in with these other, I want to keep this as close as I can. So let's just try to keep it to the two.

Secretary McNamara: I, I

President Johnson: three...

Secretary McNamara: I will be prepared to do so at lunch.

President Johnson: All right.

Secretary McNamara: Now, thirdly, Sharp recommends that, that, uh, the, uh, task force commander be authorized to engage in hot pursuit beyond the eleven-mile limit in as far as the three-mile limit, which we [i.e., the United States] accept as the definition of territorial waters. At present the instructions to the commander are: do not pursue an attacker, uh, closer to shore than eleven miles. Uh, Sharp recommends that that eleven mile limit be shifted to three miles. I've talked to Dean about this; he agrees, uh, as far as air pursuit is concerned. Pursue by air as close as three miles to shore. Do not pursue by sea closer than eleven miles. Uh, his reason for differentiating sea from air is that we can always argue that the, uh, the uh, air, uh, uh, was further out than three miles and he is concerned about taking the ships in as close as three miles to shore. I'm willing to accept his, his point for a different reason, how ever. I don't think ship pursuit uh, between eleven miles and three miles, would be effective anyhow because our ships travel at about twenty-seven knots, and these patrol boats travel at fifty knots, and the possibility of a ship being effective in that eleven to three mile area is not very great. The air power is likely the most effective power anyhow. And I would, therefore, recommend that we accept Sharp's recommendation but limit it to air.

President Johnson: All right. OK.

Secretary McNamara: Fine.

**Clip 4: Lyndon B. Johnson**  
**Tuesday, August 4, 1964, 10:53 A.M. (3:06)**  
**Telephone Conversation with Robert**  
**McNamara, Secretary of Defense,**  
**Regarding the Gulf of Tonkin Incident**

Woman's Voice: Secretary McNamara calling. Line "0."

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Yes.

Second Woman's Voice: Hello?

President Johnson: I'm trying to take this call.

Second Woman's Voice: Thank you. Yes. I'm sorry.

Secretary McNamara.

Secretary Robert McNamara: Hello?

President Johnson: Yeah.

Secretary McNamara: Mr. President, we had, just had a report from the commander of that task force out there that they have sighted two unidentified vessels, uh, and three unidentified prop aircraft; and therefore the, uh, carrier launched, uh, two F-8s, two A-4Ds and four A-1s, which are prop

President Johnson: Go back over those again. What, what did we launch?

Secretary McNamara: We launched two F-8 fighter aircraft, two A-1s which are jet attack aircraft, and four A-1Hs, which are prop-driven aircraft. So we have launched eight aircraft from the carrier to, uh, uh, examine what's in the vicinity of the destroyers and to protect the destroyers. The report is that they have observed, and we don't know by what means, whether this is radar or otherwise-I suspect it's radar-two unidentified vessels and three unidentified prop aircraft in the vicinity of the destroyers.

President Johnson: What else do we have out there?

Secretary McNamara: We have the, only the *Ticonderoga*, with its aircraft, uh, and a protective destroyer screen. I think there are three destroyers with the *Ticonderoga*. We have the *Constellation* [an aircraft carrier], which is moving out of Hong Kong, and which I uh sent orders to about an hour or two ago to move down towards South Vietnam. We don't know exactly how long it'll take; we guess about 30 hours. We have ample forces to respond not only to these attacks on the destroyers but also to retaliate should you wish to do so against targets on the land. And when I come over at noontime, I'll bring you a list of alternative target systems. We can mine the Swatow [a type of North Vietnamese patrol vessel] bases, we can- and I just issued orders to Subic Bay and the Philippines to fly the mines out to the carrier, so we'll be prepared to do it if you want to do it. We can destroy the Swatow craft by bombing. There is a petroleum system that is concentrated, uh, uh,

Very faint whisper: seventy-two

Secretary McNamara: Seventy percent of the petroleum supply of North Vietnam we believe is concentrated in three, uh, dumps, and we can bomb those, bomb or strafe those dumps and destroy the petroleum system, which would be the petroleum for the patrol craft. In addition, there are certain prestige targets that we've been working on the last several months, and we have target folders prepared on those. For example, there is one bridge that is the key bridge on the rail line south out of, uh, out of Hanoi, and we could destroy that. And there are other prestige targets

of that kind.

President Johnson: All right. Uh, good. Can I, I told, I told Rivers [Representative L. Mendel Rivers] the other day and I told him what's going to be in Charleston. He can announce that, can't he?

Secretary McNamara: Oh, surely, surely.

President Johnson: OK.

Secretary McNamara: Surely.

President Johnson: Bye. Thank you.

**Clip 5: Lyndon B. Johnson**

**Tuesday, August 4, 1964, 11:00 A.M. (1:05)**

**Telephone Conversation with Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, Regarding the Gulf of Tonkin Incident**

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Hello?

Woman's Voice: Secretary McNamara. Line "0."

President Johnson: Thanks a lot.

Secretary Robert McNamara: Mr. President, we just had word by telephone from Admiral Sharp that the destroyer is under torpedo attack.

Secretary McNamara: I think I might get, uh, Dean Rusk and Mac Bundy and have 'em come over here and we'll go over these retaliatory actions. And then we ought to

President Johnson: I sure think you ought to agree with that, yeah.

Secretary McNamara: And I've got a category here. I'll call the two of them.

President Johnson: Now where are these torpedoes coming from?

Secretary McNamara: Well, we don't know.

Presumably from these unidentified craft that I mentioned to you a moment ago. We thought that the unidentified craft might include one, uh, one PT boat, which has torpedo capability and two Swatow boats which we don't credit with torpedo capability, although they may have it.

President Johnson: What are these planes of ours doing around while they're being attacked?

Secretary McNamara: Well, presumably, the planes are attacking the, the ships. We don't have any, uh, word from, from Sharp on that. The planes would be in the area at the present time. All, all eight of them.

President Johnson: OK.

Secretary McNamara: Thank you.

President Johnson: You get them over there and then you come over here as soon as you can.

Secretary McNamara: I'll do that, yes.

**Clip 6: Lyndon B. Johnson**

**Tuesday, August 4, 1964, 5:09 P.M. (1:21)**

**Telephone Conversation with Robert**

**McNamara, Secretary of Defense.  
Regarding the Gulf of Tonkin Incident**

Secretary Robert McNamara: Bob, Mr. President. The story has broken on the AP and the UP [Associated Press and United Press, news wire services].

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Yeah, I see it.

Secretary McNamara: And, uh, uh, we tried to track it down. Jim Greenfield talked to the AP, I understand, and was told that it came from a source close to the Pentagon; it was alleged to be a chairman of a Congressional committee. I don't know what the source is. But, anyhow, it's broken. And uh, it seems to me, State and we and, and, George Reedy ought to agree now on a statement that could be made by one of the departments, I presume the Pentagon. But before doing that I wanted to ask your permission to do so. The statement that we would make, I would propose it simply say that during the night hours, the, the two destroyers were attacked by, uh, patrol boats; the attack was driven off no casualties or damage to the destroyers; we believe, uh, uh, several of the patrol boats were sunk; details won't be available until daylight.

President Johnson: That's OK.

Secretary McNamara: All right. I'll take

President Johnson: I'd just go on and put that out.

Secretary McNamara: All right. I'll take care of it

President Johnson: Uh, anything else?

Secretary McNamara: No, I talked to Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon, secretary of the treasury] and he fully agrees with the action. I couldn't get hold of Bobby [F. Kennedy, attorney general]; he's nowhere that he can be found. But I'll keep a call in for him.

**AUGUST 1964: THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT  
CONTINUES -PRESIDENT JOHNSON DISCUSSES U.S.  
RETALIATION WITH DEFENSE SECRETARY ROBERT S.  
McNAMARA**

With decisions made regarding bombing of North Vietnam, the evening conversation between LBJ and Robert McNamara focuses on the timing of the president's announcement of the attacks and the wording of his announcement. Johnson also discusses whether he should call opposition presidential candidate Barry Goldwater to inform him of the action. LBJ indeed made that call (not included in the present collection), and Goldwater expressed complete support for the president's decision. As already recounted, LBJ made his announcement late that evening.

Many of President Johnson's later Vietnam decisions, including the initiation of a regular bombing campaign

against North Vietnam in February 1965 and his commitment of ground troops to a major war in South Vietnam that summer, showed this same careful attention to the public relations aspects of the issues. The methods of making and articulating a decision Johnson displayed regarding the Gulf of Tonkin express his standard operating procedure. The short time LBJ had to make his decision in August 1964 led to extensive use of the telephone, and thus assists our effort to illustrate his methods.

**Clip 7: Lyndon B. Johnson**  
**Tuesday, August 4, 1964, 9:15 P.M. (5:34)**  
**Telephone Conversation with Robert**  
**McNamara, Secretary of Defense,**  
**Regarding the Gulf of Tonkin Incident(s)**

Secretary Robert McNamara: Bob McNamara, Mr. President.

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Yeah.

Secretary McNamara: I just talked to, uh, Admiral Sharp again. He's been in contact with the carriers; they have not been able to launch yet. They won't launch for another, about forty-five minutes. They should launch at 10:00 P.M. I have this suggestion to make to you. That you make your statement at approximately 10:00 P.M. and that you leave out one sentence. It is the sentence that states 'Air action is now in execution against gun boats and supporting facilities in and near four ports of North Vietnam.' Without that sentence, you don't disclose the targets but you do disclose that action is presently underway.

President Johnson: Now, let me see where it's; what, what

Secretary McNamara: It's in the, it's in the fourth paragraph on the first page.

President Johnson: Yeah, I see. "...but repeat acts of violence against the armed forces. . . . Air action is now. .

Secretary McNamara: No, you would s-, you would read it, "But repeated acts of war against the armed forces must be met not only with alert defense but with a positive reply. That reply is now being given as I speak to you." Period. Then take out the next sentence.

President John Well, does that, uh, make it too indefinite?

Secretary McNamara: No, sir, I don't believe so. I think it's perfectly appropriate that while the action's underway, you not describe, uh, the specific targets or, or the type of action.

President Johnson: What do you think about, I don't see why we bring Gold water in on this. Why don't we just say I felt it appropriate just to communicate my decision to the Republican candidate for president.

Secretary McNamara: Uh



President Johnson: And I'll say he's assured me of his

Secretary McNamara: Yeah

President Johnson: full support. I think it makes us sound like we're very much together and buddies and agreein' on bombing everybody.

Secretary McNamara: Well, in that case, I'd leave out the paragraph.

President Johnson: You wouldn't even say you'd communicated.

Secretary McNamara: I wouldn't say I communicated it.

President Johnson: Well, what do you think?

Secretary McNamara: I, I would, well, have you been able to talk to him?

President Johnson: No. Not yet

Secretary McNamara: I'd, I'd leave the paragraph out. You've talked up above about the leaders of both parties, and it seems to me that's the strong point.

President Johnson: Yeah. The trouble is, he's going to be calling in about 9:30

Secretary McNamara: Well, I'd keep talking to him, trying to talk to him all right, but, but I don't think I'd refer to it and say

President Johnson: What would you do, just wait until after, talk, talk to him until he's out on a [boat? slurred word] and they've gone to get him. Or would you talk to him as soon as he gets in and tell him I'm going to make a statement and I want him to know about it and then not refer to it.

Secretary McNamara: That's exactly what I'd do, Mr. President. I'd try to talk to him before I made it, but I wouldn't refer to having talked to him. And, and the purpose of talking to him would be to stop any opposition from him. And if you did that, I think you've accomplished your purpose. You don't have to tie him into your statement.

President Johnson: I think it's better not to, don't you?

Secretary McNamara: Yes.

President Johnson: And what's delayed them so?

Secretary McNamara: Just the, the limitations of lime, Mr. President. We ask an awful lot of them. They said initially they could do it. But, uh, it's proven now they couldn't; they had to brief the crews and load the aircraft with specific types of weapons for these particular targets and it took more time than they anticipated.

President Johnson: And when they leave the carrier at 10:00, how long does it take them to get over the target?

Secretary McNamara: The last time, over the target, will be two hours from then, we believe.

President Johnson: Twelve.

Secretary McNamara: Which would be about u o'clock, our time. The first planes over the

President John Well, do we want to give them two hours notice?

Secretary McNamara: I don't believe there's any reason not to, Mr. President. I don't think there's any serious problem in that.

President Johnson: Better check that, Bob.

Secretary McNamara: I did. I just talked to Admiral Sharp about it. He, he did not want this particular sentence read, the one I'm suggesting be taken out, uh, prior to the time they get over the targets.

President Johnson: Well, won't they get there simultaneously, almost?

Secretary McNamara: They'll get the, the, uh, statement simultaneously, but they won't know what targets are being attacked.

President Johnson: Well, it looks like they'd think that they're liable to hit where those boats are coming from. Looks like they might get out there with some anti-aircraft guns. I'd sure as hell hate to have some mother say, "you announced it and my boy got killed."

Secretary McNamara: I don't think there's much damage, uh, uh, much danger of that, Mr. President. How late would you be willing to hold the statement?

President Johnson: I just, uh, I guess we could hold it till [the] 11 o'clock news. I don't know. We don't have to make it, do we?

Secretary McNamara: Oh, I think, uh, I think you need to make some kind of a statement at this lime. Because tomorrow morning will be too late. Something will have to be on the news tomorrow morning. It ought to come from you.

President Johnson: Well let's see how it goes along, uh

Secretary McNamara: All right

President Johnson: He's told you that he's going to launch them at 10:00?

Secretary McNamara: That's right.

President Johnson: And [it] takes them two hours to get over the target?

Secretary McNamara: Well, the launch will take place over a period of time, and the last aircraft launched is estimated to be over the target at two hours after

President Johnson: Launch

Secretary McNamara: Launch.

President Johnson: Well, what do you think the first one will be?

Secretary McNamara: The first one ought to be over the target within an hour after launch, but the radar of the North Vietnamese should pick up the first aircraft, uh, a few minutes after launch. Say 10:30 our time, the North Vietnamese would be aware of, uh, attacking aircraft coming in.

President Johnson: So that would be all right then.

Secretary McNamara: I would think so then, and [if] you did it at 10:30, you could make the 11 o'clock

news.

President Johnson: OK. And thank you.

Secretary McNamara: Right-oh.

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